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SUBJ: A MODERN ROLE MODEL: GOVERNOR GENERAL MICHAELLE JEAN

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11. (SBU) Summary: As a former refugee and Canada's first Governor General of African/Caribbean heritage, Michaelle Jean is an evocative symbol of a modern, multicultural, and multiracial Canada. She is a popular and charismatic figure who has performed her largely ceremonial duties with grace and style, although some commentators raised concerns over her political inexperience at a time of political instability and minority government in 2008. End summary.

FOUR VICE-REGAL TASKS

12. (U) Head of State Queen Elizabeth II's representative in Canada is the Governor General, whom the British monarch appoints on the advice of the Canadian Prime Minister. The Governor General's role is primarily ceremonial and is built on four major themes specified on Her Majesty's own website: representing the Crown in Canada; representing Canadians abroad and promoting Canadian sovereignty; celebrating excellence; and, promoting national identity and unity.

13. (U) The Governor General summons, opens, and ends sessions of Parliament, gives Royal Assent to legislation, signs State documents, dissolves Parliament for elections, appoints the Prime Minister, and (on the advice of the Prime Minister) appoints and presides over the swearing-in of the Chief Justice, the Chief of the Defence Staff, and cabinet ministers. The Governor General acts, with the advice of the Prime Minister, to ensure that Canada has a functioning government at all times. The Governor General is also Commander-in-Chief of Canada's armed forces. By convention, Governors General serve five year terms, but some have served up to seven years, at the request of the prime minister.

14. (U) The Governor General also receives royal visitors, Heads of State, and prominent guests, accepts credentials of new ambassadors, and conducts State visits abroad. Madame Jean and her French-born husband Jean-Daniel Lafond welcomed President George W. Bush to Canada and met with him privately at the Ottawa International Airport on August 20, 2007, when he visited Canada for the North American Leaders' Summit at Montebello, Quebec.

BIOGRAPHY

15. (U) Her Excellency the Right Honourable Michaelle Jean, Governor General of Canada, was sworn in on September 27, 2005. She is Canada's 27th Governor General and is the third successive journalist to be appointed to the post. Madame Jean is Canada's first Governor General of African/Caribbean heritage, the first refugee, and the second (after her immediate predecessor, Adrienne Clarkson) "visible minority" Canadian in this position. She has made disadvantaged youth and "breaking the solitudes" among racial, linguistic, and cultural and gender groups in Canada her main outreach priorities.

16. (U) Madame Jean was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on September 6, 1957. In 1968, she and her family fled Haiti as political refugees and settled in Quebec, where she was raised by her (single)

mother. Madame Jean earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Italian and Hispanic languages and literature from the Universite de Montreal, studied toward a Master of Arts degree in comparative literature there, and, from 1984 to 1986, taught at the university's Faculty of Italian Studies. She went on to study linguistics and literature at the University of Perugia, the University of Florence, and the Catholic University of Milan. She is fluent in five languages (French, English, Italian, Spanish, and Haitian Creole) and has a reading knowledge of Portuguese.

¶7. (U) In 1988, Madame Jean joined Radio-Canada (the French-language service of Canada's national broadcaster) and enjoyed an award-winning career as a journalist and host of a wide range of news and public affairs programs in French and English. Together with her husband, she also produced documentaries, including three critically-acclaimed films on the 40th anniversary of the Cuban revolution, the experience of being a person of color in Quebec, and reflections on her Haitian homeland. She has a life-long interest in helping women and children who are victims of domestic violence. Madame Jean and Mr. Lafond have one six-year old daughter, Marie-Eden, whom they adopted in Haiti. Mr. Lafond has two adult daughters from a previous marriage and two grandchildren.

POPULAR CHOICE. . .

¶8. (SBU) In 2005, Liberal then-Prime Minister Paul Martin's choice of Michaelle Jean as Governor General came as a surprise to many Canadians; Martin, however, lauded Jean as a woman of talent and achievement whose "personal story is nothing short of extraordinary" and who is uniquely qualified "to represent all of Canada to all Canadians and to the rest of the world." Most commentators welcomed the symbolism of her appointment, despite some doubts about her

OTTAWA 00000030 002 OF 002

political inexperience at a time of minority government, a minor controversy over her husband's alleged sovereigntist sympathies, and criticism from the separatist Bloc Quebecois and Quebec sovereigntists who saw the appointment as a Liberal ploy to gain seats in Quebec, especially among the large Haitian diaspora in Montreal. However, federalists outside Quebec hailed her as an "inspired" choice who would "be a voice for Canada in Quebec and represent the new Quebec to the rest of Canada."

. . . BUT NO LONGER STRANGER TO CONTROVERSY

¶9. (SBU) Jean is an inspirational and charismatic figure who has carried out her ceremonial duties with grace and style. She stepped into uncharted constitutional waters on December 4, when she acceded to Prime Minister Stephen Harper's request to suspend ("prorogue") Parliament briefly in order to avoid a vote of confidence in the House of Commons, which the government would have lost (reftel). The concern remains that she will again face a delicate choice in the coming year between calling a new election and asking the Liberal and New Democratic parties to form a virtually unprecedented coalition, should the government lose any upcoming confidence vote. As a result, some political commentators have stepped up their calls for future Governors General to have greater experience or training in constitutional affairs at a time when Canada likely faces continued minority government.

¶10. (SBU) Madame Jean and Prime Minister Harper appear to have a cordial but cool relationship. Some Conservatives reportedly suspect her private sympathies lean to the center left of the political spectrum, and have suggested her husband's alleged separatist sentiments may influence her own political views. Prior to the constitutional crisis in December, Prime Minister Harper had already reportedly discontinued the convention of regular, confidential vice-regal briefings to update the Governor General on political events and views. The lack of consultation underscores the largely ceremonial aspect of her role, but also increases her unpredictability in view of the office's theoretically important constitutional powers.

WILKINS